

Research Brief

Evolving practices of climate governance: redefining and sidelining equity?

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Prepared for Workshop
Clear-Eyed Equity: Setting a Climate Equity and Justice Research Agenda

Bonn, Germany
May 15, 2017

In the first decades of multilateral climate politics centered on the UNFCCC, equity remained a deeply contested concept, with academic debate and geopolitical conflict alike focusing on how to operationalize the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities” (CBDR-RC) of industrialized and developing countries in combating climate change. Much scholarly attention focused on diverse ways of *conceptualizing responsibility and burden-sharing* in this context, even as operationalization within the practices of climate governance remained uneven and contested.

The point of departure for this research brief is to consider whether and how equity is being (re-)conceptualized in recent debates and practices of multilateral climate governance, and potentially being depoliticized and defanged in the process. Is the politically contested edge of equity being blunted in practice? I propose analyzing this question through empirical scrutiny of three potential “sites” for such reconceptualization: first, within the focus on *transparency* (or measuring, reporting and verification) as an increasingly central tenet within multilateral climate politics; second, within proliferating *anticipation* processes, i.e. scenario building and climate modelling exercises intended to imagine transformative climate futures, particularly in light of the aspirational 1.5 degree temperature goal; and third, through calls for a more *bottom-up* realization of equity in multilateral climate politics.

How are debates and practices relating to these elements recasting notions of equity, and with what consequences for (differential responsibility to take) ambitious climate action? First, the Paris Agreement’s call for an enhanced transparency framework applicable to all countries arguably embodies a discernible shift from a focus on the ‘responsibility’ component of CBDR-RC to a focus almost exclusively on the capacity component. Much attention is now being devoted to negotiating and operationalizing the notion of “flexibility” as the linchpin of differentiation here, but flexibility *based on differing capacities* to participate in an enhanced transparency framework applicable to all. Leaving aside the self-differentiation implied by the NDC process, this raises the question of whether **equity and differentiation is increasingly being equated only with capacity (building) within multilateral climate politics and the Paris Agreement**, and if so, what the implications of such a shift might be.

Second, what are the political and equity implications of seemingly technical debates and processes focused on anticipating alternative climate futures, and pathways to realize them, including controversial new options such as climate engineering (CE)? Again, there seems to be a recent discernible shift within CE-related debates, with advocates of climate engineering now evoking equity explicitly as a rationale *for* climate engineering, particularly in light of the aspirational 1.5 temperature goal. The argument is that there is a moral imperative to explore CE options, given that the global poor and the most vulnerable stand to suffer most from dangerous climate change. The suggestion that an aspirational 1.5 temperature goal *requires CE on equity grounds* is a problematic upending of earlier CE-related equity debates, which focused on potential inequitable distributive consequences *of* CE.

Finally, it is also useful to scrutinize whether there is another shift underway in understandings and operationalization of equity in this multilateral context – a move (advocated, inter alia, by influential intermediary organizations such as the WRI) to emphasize a more *bottom-up* realization of equity. The call here is to assess how considerations of equity might shape, and be realized through, climate actions being taken domestically within countries. While this may be a laudable extension of a push for more equitable climate action *writ large*, it may also serve to shift attention from the more long-standing, geopolitically contested consideration of state-to-state equity focusing on responsibilities, as originally implicated within CBDR-RC. If so, the implications of such a shift are also important to consider.